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Poster Presentation

Responses to Violence Against Women Awareness Posters: Are Graphic Images Disempowering?

Physical and sexual violence against girls and women is a widespread problem across the world. Awareness of violence against women (VAW) is often gained through print media campaigns. Some campaigns include explicit depictions of VAW meant to engage audiences through fear appeals. In public health research, effective fear appeals must a) engage the viewer's emotions by conveying self-relevant threat and b) promote viewer self-efficacy by communicating how the threat can be avoided. Yet unlike many public health risks (e.g., smoking), VAW is not easily avoided by individual behavioral change. Without a self-efficacy component, graphic VAW campaigns may paradoxically function to disempower the female audiences intended to benefit. Undergraduate women ($N = 62$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (graphic VAW, nongraphic VAW, workplace safety control). Each viewed a set of ten safety message awareness posters before completing self-report measures of responsive anxiety, collective self-esteem, and safety self-efficacy. Compared to control, graphic VAW images induced anxiety and led women to de-identify as female. Also compared to control, both graphic and nongraphic VAW images reduced women's reported levels of safety self-efficacy. Future research on nongraphic VAW awareness posters is needed to assess if benefits outweigh the emotional costs for female audiences.

Keywords: Violence against women, media violence, fear appeals, self-efficacy, disempowerment.